



OpenSeat's Play With Your Food Idea

As OpenSeat, our vision is to see people connect through meals, and so we see mealtime as being more than 'just eating'; meals can also be a time of creativity, discovery, education, social connection and fun.

A 'Play With Your Food' (PWYF) meal aims to **foster fun and meaningful connections between parents and their children**, contributing to the strength of family relationships and childhood development. The guidelines below are designed to bring parents (or caregivers) and children together to engage in play and conversation during a meal.

We invite hosts – not necessarily parents of children themselves – to plan and host a meal for families in their community, providing them with a space to eat, play, converse and connect – without the distraction of screens* or the busyness of daily life. There are two main ways the *Play With Your Food* idea can be brought to life, depending on the play medium (*note where the comma falls!*):

- 1) ***Play With Your Food***: Where food is the play medium that prompts interactions and conversation around the table
- 2) ***Play, With Your Food***: Where toys or other non-food props are the play medium that prompt interactions, in the context of a meal.

Our desire is that you creatively engage with the suggestions below – much depends on the specific children and parents in your target community and your own skill set as a host. Based on this, put together a plan of action for your meal and playful activities that engage parents' and children's physical, social, emotional, cognitive, and creative capabilities – helping them to interact in a meaningful and fun way.

‘Play With Your Food’ Guidelines

The guidelines below cover 6 main areas: general hosting approach, age and ability factors, the venue and table, the chosen play medium, the food component, and games/activities.

General approach

- *Ideal number of hosts per meal:* 2 (one activity host, one food host). For meals with two tables, up to 4 hosts.
- *Ideal number of guests per table:* 9 to 12 people (3 to 5 parent-child units)
- *Ideal children ages:* 4-12 years
- *Time length of meal:* variable on mealtime (breakfast, brunch, lunch, supper) and activities planned. Allocate between 2 to 3 hours.
- Depending on the play medium, hosts may wish that indemnity forms are signed by parents
- Rather than planning multiple games or activities, plan to have one or two with several secondary activities that can be drawn upon as needed.
- When planning activities, the host will need to consider how parents and children interact around the table:
 - Parents versus children – whole table involved
 - Within family units – parent(s) and their own children (small groups)
 - Across family units – where one family interacts with a neighbouring family
- Ideally, divide responsibilities for food & activity facilitation between two co-hosts
- When hosting the meal, provide a brief introduction directed at parents and children regarding what will happen during the meal, including some ground rules so that potential food fights are prevented.
- Upon arrival, consider where parents and children will mingle (or play informally) before sitting down. If younger children are involved, having toys in the table’s vicinity could provide a useful distraction while interacting with parents/caregivers.
- It is best to use the second half of the meal to engage in more meaningful conversation between parents and children, once everyone has settled into the structure of the event and the ice has been broken between guests.

Age and ability factors

From the outset, hosts should determine the desired age/ability range of the children attending their meal. Activities will ideally accommodate all children around the table.

Pre & semi-literate children / 4-8 years

- Meals for this age should not include activities or games requiring literacy skills, and where present, conversational games should be simpler rather than complex.
- Unless the table activities are highly engaging, hosts should plan for games or activities involving movement and away from the table space (perhaps using the table and chairs as props, as in Musical Open Seats).

Literate children / 9-12 years

- Activities for this age group can involve more written/spoken elements, where conversational games are prioritised and any hands-on play more as a prompt for fun & engaging conversation – prompts on napkins and ‘Ask Me Anything’ games may work better
- More complex play media can be utilised for this age group, with more competition / cooperation possibilities.

Play Props

Given that the event is focused on facilitating play during a meal, the following props are recommended:

- Food (see [below](#))
- Wooden or Lego blocks, or other modular toys (if food is not the play medium)
- Napkins or paper table runners, along with coloured pens or pencils. Hosts are encouraged to contact the OpenSeat team to workshop specific prompts to be printed on table runners or napkins. For examples, see [below](#).

Food

The food will ideally be healthy, although not to the point of being a killjoy. The food could either be fully prepared beforehand by the hosts, or some food preparation could be integrated as an activity for parents and children. Fruit & vegetables are important ingredients, particularly because they work well as props for play.

- For example, modular pieces of food like celery, carrot sticks, baby potatoes, falafel balls, pork sausages, potato wedges, brinjal slices, etc.
- These food blocks can be bound together with ‘food cement’, for example, hummus, potato mash, and so on.

For dessert and pre-dinner snacks, modular foods are also ideal, e.g.:

- fruit slices (apples, dates, pineapple),
- making communal banana splits within a family
- Brownie ‘bricks’.
- Puff chips, where dips like hummus, or even saliva, can act as glue.

Consider hygiene if food is the play medium: food structures should be made within a family unit. Toothpicks and forks should be available, and parents should dish out food to children’s plates or bowls — children can play with *their* food, but not the table’s food.

Playful & Conversational Activities

The *Play With Your Food* hosts should decide which activities they wish to use for the event. When food is the play medium, then a typical activity would involve guests building their own structures out of food blocks – using plates as a foundation. These ‘food houses’ can be used to prompt conversation between parents and children: each successive block added to a food house might require a question or answer.

Whatever the role of food, the central idea is that there will be several games occurring during the meal. Depending on the age group, these may be more or less conversational. Some potential games and activities are provided below:

- **Family Introductions** - these are made by parents, each including a funny aspect to break the ice (e.g. each parent needs to make the sound of their favourite farm animal)
- **Musical Open Seats**, also known as musical chairs. A game to play before or after food has been eaten.
- **Build the [x] Food House** - if food is the play medium, parents can collaborate with children to build a food house, where X is the tallest, strangest, prettiest etc; the hosts judge the food houses prior to the eating phase of the meal, and give out small prizes based on this.
- **'Ask Me Anything'** — where parents answer children's questions
- **PWYF Conversation Prompts** — on fun and creative topics:
 - "If you could have any superpower, what would it be and how would you use it?"*
 - "If you could be any animal for a day, which animal would you choose and why?"*
 - "If you could invent a new flavour of ice cream, what would it be called and what ingredients would it have?"*
 - "If you could create your own holiday, what would it be called and how would you celebrate it?"*
 - "If you could have a conversation with any character in a movie or book, who would it be and what would you talk about?"*
 - "If you could have any job in the world, what would it be and why?"*
- **Unseen guesses**: Children guess what parents have built, & vice versa
- **Mission Improbable**: Dividing up the table into groups, ask children to describe what they have built
- **Traffic Lights**: where every guest (parent or child) evaluates the meal as a conclusion activity
- **Online activities and games like [Skribbl.io](https://skribbl.io)**, accessed via a napkin QR code link (see [below](#)). These would be mediated through parents' smartphones and a projector or TV, could be incorporated into the meal. *The involvement of screens is justifiable as a medium for playful connection rather than distraction.*

Venue & Table

Ideally, there would be a signal that the table space has been set up for more than just eating food together — but that it's for play too. The venue and table should be visually fun and interesting. For example, this could be:

- an organic garden theme with leaf and branch cuttings
- brightly-coloured toys and balloons decorating the table and room
- use of a paper table runner with crayons/coloured pencils. This helps signal that the meal is 'set apart for play', and it enables certain writing & drawing activities.

Play With Your Food Hosting Package

To help hosts with planning and facilitating the meal, OpenSeat can provide a physical hosting package that includes the following:

1) An A4 version of the guidelines above for easy reference while planning *Play With Your Food* meals.

2) A pack of 20 prompt cards for conversation & food-related games (see [above](#))

3) *Play With Your Food* airlaid napkins with customisable prompts connected to conversation, games or meal review, e.g.

‘This napkin belongs to _____ (front)

‘What questions do you want to ask?’ (front)

‘Draw a picture of your family here’ (front)

Write down 10 words you associate with _____ (front)

‘What did you like most about the meal?’ (back)

Click to see existing examples to the right:



4) (Optional) A customisable QR code stamp to use on napkins or table runners,
> to use an online activity during the meal,
> or to send guests to a review form at the end of a meal

